

Swimming with sharks

I've been in the water with sharks many times, sometimes on purpose, most times not. I have a lot of respect for animals at the top of the food chain, but I don't fear them. I think of sharks a lot like alligators — as long as you don't provoke them or do something stupid, they're not interested in you and really just want to be left alone.

The first thing you notice about sharks when you enter the water with them, is that they don't swim away. Every other creature under the sea quickly retreats, but a shark, with evidently nothing to fear, might even approach out of curiosity. They are the king of their domain, and they know it. I find them fascinating.

The sharks you see are not the problem, it's the ones you don't see that are a concern. On land, we unconsciously take it for granted that, for the most part, no other animal will be able to harm us. In the water you are definitely not in your natural element, and all rules go out the door.

When I lived on my sailboat in the South Pacific, I would scuba dive a lot, mostly for fun, and often to catch dinner. On almost every occasion I would find myself swimming with sharks, and I became used to it. They were just part of the natural environment. Sharks swim slowly and confidently and I love watching them.

Although I realize I'm probably not going to be attacked for no reason, I'm also much more wary after I've speared a fish and I'm bringing its bleeding body back to the surface. As is common in life, I learned that the hard way.

In my early 20's I was near Bimini in the Bahamas and spearfishing in shallow water near a reef at the end of the day. I was catching fish on the small side, but large enough to eat, and each time I would spear one, instead of swimming all the way back to the boat, I would keep it with me. After a while I had several fish next to me, all bleeding. It's difficult to see blood underwater, as it disperses so quickly, but as we all know, sharks have an incredible sense of smell and can detect blood from far away. I should've been thinking about this, but I was young and naïve and hadn't noticed that I was being watched. Most of the time sharks have a calm, slow demeanor, as if they haven't a care in the world, but when they're excited or agitated they quickly dart back-and-forth. With all that blood in the water, I had evidently upset one of them. This shark wanted what I had, but I had worked for it and was hungry, and I was determined to keep what I had caught. My back was against the reef and I was in shallow water, so I had the confidence of knowing that territory was safe. Now it was just a matter of getting to the boat.

So far I had seen only one shark, but once I got into the open water, I had to swim, hold my spear gun and the fish, keep my eyes on that shark, while also looking

around to make sure there wasn't another one behind me. It seemed to last forever, but I'm sure it was less than a minute. I at least knew not to panic, move quickly or splash, so I used my fins to steadily and smoothly push myself along, all the while keeping an eye on my nemesis. It was nerve-racking, and when I got to the boat, with one last thrust, I popped out of the water and onto the boat in a way I had never done before.

I learned some valuable lessons: sharks are more active at the end of the day, and get a bleeding fish out of the water as quickly as possible. I never forgot that.

Knowing my fascination with sharks, Rachel got me an anniversary present to swim with sharks in a large tank, visible to the public, at Sea World. My friend Cliff's wife got him the same "present ", so we went together. There were plenty of jokes about checking to see if our life insurance was up-to-date, but we were excited to go. There were lots of "sign your life away" forms to fill out, and after a lengthy safety training we were allowed in the tank. These were big, fearsome looking Bull sharks that I was unfamiliar with, but still, I felt safe in the knowledge that these beasts were probably being adequately fed and that we were nothing more than a curiosity. We also had safety divers with us, on guard with defensive weapons, just in case. It was fun and exciting, but I always feel bad for any animal that is kept out of its natural habitat.

Several years earlier I had gone on a "shark feed" trip in the South Pacific country of Vanuatu. It was a scuba diving trip with me and about a half dozen guys from Australia. They took us out by boat to a location where they do this regularly, and the sharks know it. Before we got in the water, they warned us not to have anything shiny on us. If you've ever been scuba diving, you know the equipment is full of shiny little bits and pieces, so that was starting to make me nervous. Once we got to the bottom, in about 30 feet of water, they had us spread out in a circle around a large weight with a chain attached to it, being held straight up off the ground by a submerged buoy. We were motioned to lie flat on the bottom, and to remain still with our heads all pointed to the center of the circle. One of the crewmembers then attached a canvas bag full of fish parts to the top of the floating buoy in front of us.

I forgot to mention that from the moment we got into the water, there were sharks all over the place. They also knew what was going to happen, so they were in that "agitated" phase, starting back-and-forth and being very aggressive with each other — they wanted to be the first to the feast.

When the crew thought that all of us were safely prone on the ocean floor, another crewmember yanked on the long rope attached to the bag, releasing its contents to the ferocious sharks. I had never seen anything like this! Shark after shark viciously attacked the bait, and sometimes each other, in what can only be described as a frenzy. Again and again they kept at it, and there were fish parts flying everywhere;

eventually near us on the bottom as well. In an effort to grab a stray piece, one of the sharks quickly darted right between me and the next guy and evidently hit him and knocked his mask askew. No one realized it yet, but he was also bleeding. It's common training in scuba to know how to get the water out of your mask, and once that was accomplished it was determined the guy was just shaken up and not seriously wounded. After most of the sharks had disappeared into the blackness, we slowly made our way to the surface.

Shark skin is sort of like sandpaper and this guy had a small wound on his forehead with some minor bleeding that was just enough to make a great story. If you know Australian guys, believe me, this is the greatest thing that ever happened in his life!

